



Museum of Memory. Architecture Today

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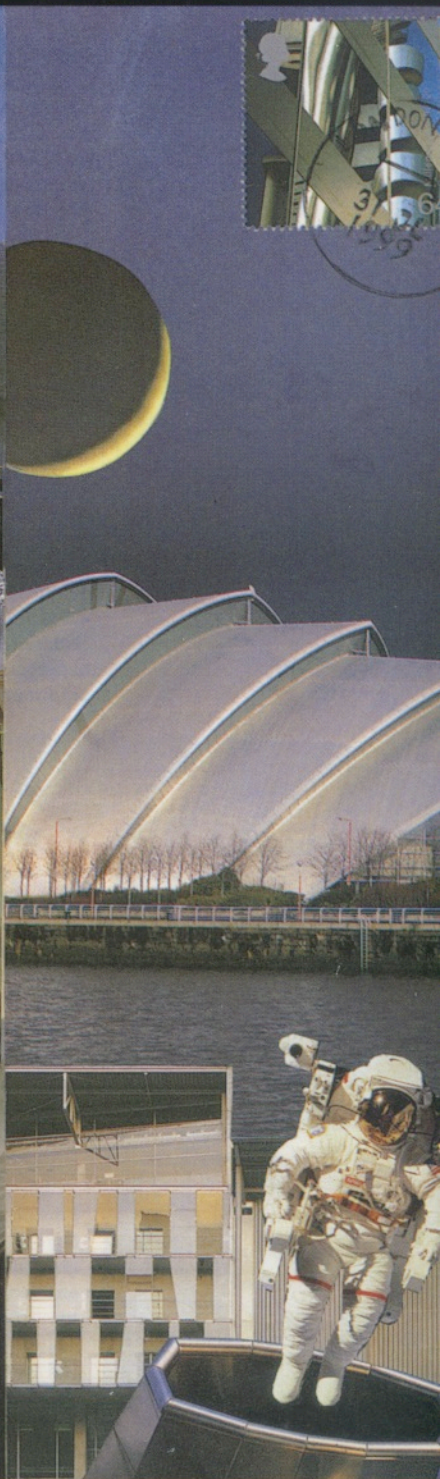
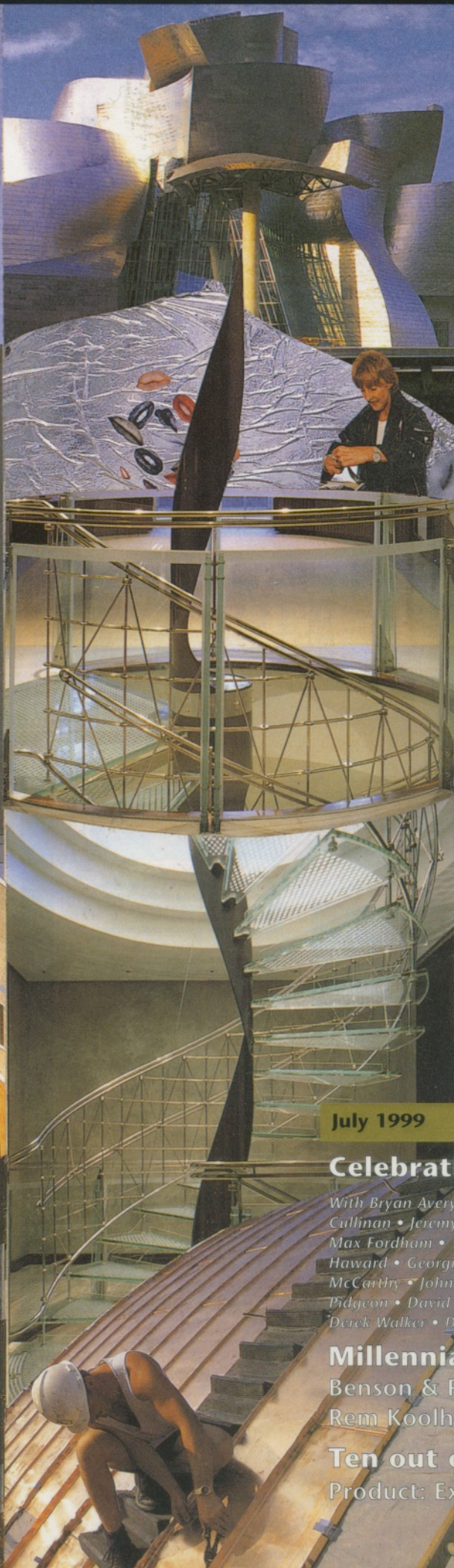
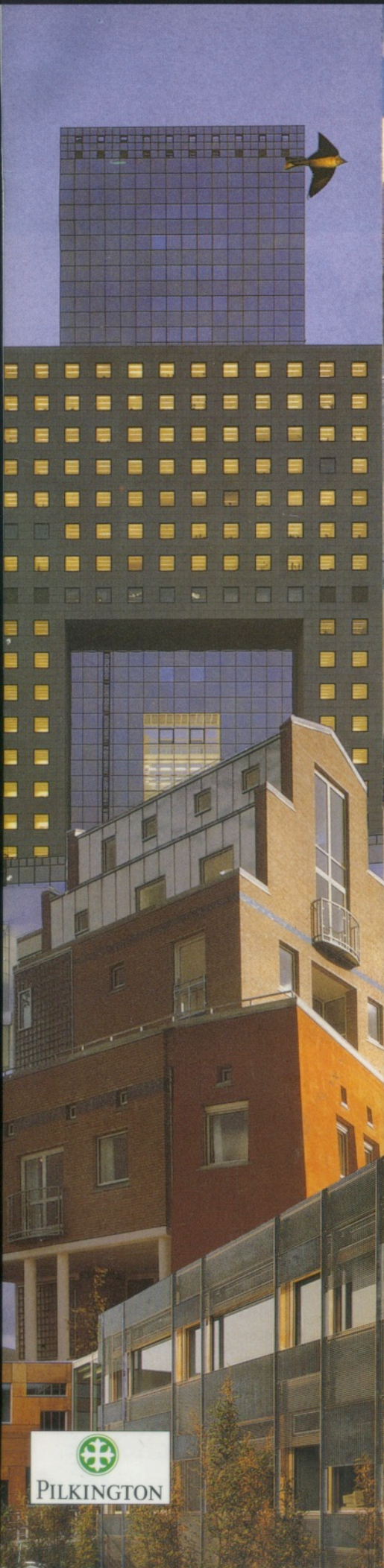
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July 1999

Celebrating AT's 100th issue

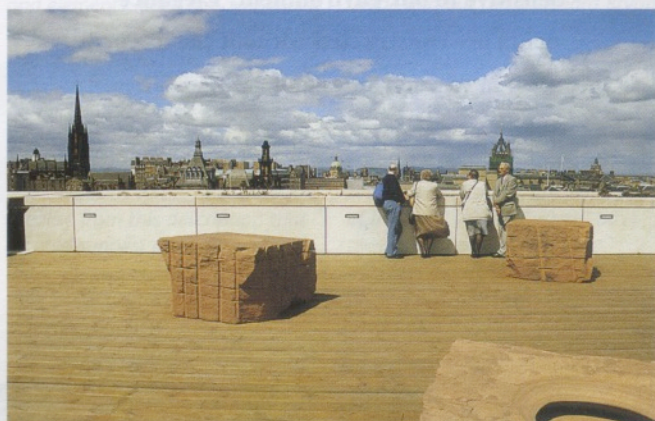
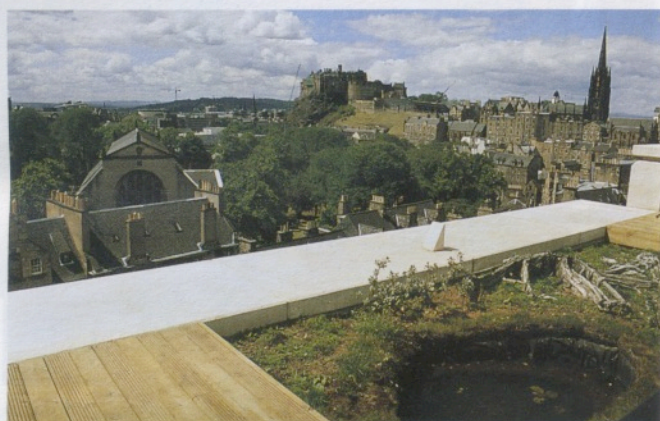
With Bryan Avery • Bob Bennett • Julian Bicknell • Ted Cullinan • Jeremy Dixon • Terry Farrell • Lord Fawcley • Max Fordham • Tony Fretton • James Gowan • Birkin Haward • Georgina Livingston • John McAslan • Chris McCarthy • John Melvin • Richard Parnaby • Monica Pidgeon • David Rock • Barrie Todd • Jovan Heyningen • Derek Walker • David Wild • John Winter • Chris Wilkinson

Millennial milestones:

Benson & Forsyth in Edinburgh
Rem Koolhaas in Bordeaux

Ten out of ten: AT's awards

Product: External skin, Landscape



Paul Clarke

For the 1991 competition Benson and Forsyth presented a diagram of the cross-section of their proposal. The elements of this drawing sit like the symbols of a Pictish stone, distinct and absolute. A bull-horned roof of flora rises from within a labyrinth box. A head-shaped frame looks back across the city. A great winged bird lifts to the sky.

Architecture, city and landscape fuse into one. The elements float across MacDiarmid's 'mountain peak and ocean floor', across the body of the Scottish landscape. The drawing implies a transformation. Like the stone symbols it echoes a process of metempsychosis. Matter to spirit.

In the years from competition to completion, none of the enigmatic force of this drawing has been lost. The stunning whiteness of the superstructure confirms this as it emerges from within stone walls on Chambers Street, distinct against the skyline.

Inside the museum the 'box of tricks' is carefully wrapped in

sequences of slots, objects and spaces. The dialogue with Greyfriars church behind the wall is ever present. The thick walls housing the objects construct a physical and architectural texture of history where a cubist sense of space plays with a crafted knowledge of historical space. Staircases weave their way through the fabric, beautifully cast and poised in their detail. Walls are cut, shaped and lifted, revealing a series of dialogues with the objects they enfold and the framework of the city beyond.

Figural objects signal beginnings, crossings and departures, acting as guides on our way up. Light reveals the paths. We emerge from the semi-darkness of the basement towards a structured, contrasting and coloured sense of light. There are reaffirmed encounters with the play of light in the city in which the building is rooted: the top light of Waverley station, slots of blue above narrow wynds, silhouettes against the horizon and the shadows of bridges as they cross the valleys. Primary objects structure

the museum like the city churches.

As in the diagram you are drawn up, towards the light, out of the fold of the labyrinth and towards the sky. You are pulled with an increasing sense of historical and spatial vertigo, pinwheeling like the circulation of Linlithgow Palace up through a complexity of space. We look down over our path, tracing our thread outwards from the layerings of Scottish history.

As you progress higher through the spatial strata, the last traces of stone drop away. The main volume lifts under the arc of the roof. We are finding our way out of history. Industry and innovation have crafted the steel legs framing the great hall and holding the 'vessel' overhead. The emergent architecture parallels the cultural shift as one of white luminosity rising amidst the matrix and skin of the city. On arriving on the roof terrace, across the final bridge, landscape and city open out before us. The roof sails across the topography of Edinburgh and over the strata of history below.

On the west prow sit two

carefully cast concrete pieces, a 'testament spirituel' of the architects' beliefs, constructs of Cezanne-like purism with which to view the city and landscape.

To the east a window frames the distant Bass Rock, floating free like the drum of the museum, against the Fife and North Berwick coastlines. The blue horizon of the sea is drawn in to confront the three-dimensional artifice of Edinburgh. The university dome is set powerfully against Arthur's Seat and the Salisbury Crags – the wings of the bird in the drawing.

After our cultural wanderings, our search for meaning, we find ourselves at home, standing on the roof, open to the world, sensing the edges of the island:

'the vessel drifts on
with songs on board
how all becomes strange...'

Le Poème de L'Angle Droit,
Le Corbusier.

Top Elevation detail; view from the castle (ph: Richard Bryant); and rooftop terrace.

Middle Concept sketch, roof views.